# Forage Trends in the Equine Industry

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Despite forage being the most important component of a horse's diet next to water, a significant portion of horse owners and managers find themselves with more questions than answers when it comes to determining what forage option is best for their horse, and then obtaining it. Factors such as the economic downturn and weather patterns (not conducive to quality horse hay or pasture production), combined with a need for education on horse pasture, hay and equine nutrition in general, have contributed to anxiety over forage for horses. In many cases there is a heavy reliance on the ability of horse owners and barn managers to source hay, as many do not have the resources to maintain adequate pasture to support their forage needs. Additionally, a one-size-fits-all approach to forage for horses doesn't always work as differences in breed, life-stage, activity level, health status, and environment translate to diversity in dietary requirements. To further complicate the matter trends over the past few years indicate that hay availability has become more limited, costs have increased, quality has been variable, while demand remains fairly constant.

The good news is there are a variety of resources available to help make the topic of forage less intimidating for the horse community. There is a growing body of scientific data providing insight on tools and management practices that can help horses owners decide what is best for them, make decisions that will reduce waste, and maximize forage resources[1,2,3,4]. Commercial feed manufacturers are selling a variety of forage alternatives, complete concentrate feeds, and products designed to balance nutrient or energy deficiencies that may exist with a forage only diet, and that help support a horse's ability to more efficiently utilize the forage component of their diet[5]. Significant progress has been made by both the commercial feed industry and university animal science and extension programs to provide science-based information in a concise format that is readily available, easy to understand and apply (e.g. Nutrena Feed Room Blog[6], Rutgers University Equine Science Center[7], University of Minnesota Equine Extension[8], eXtension[9]). Educational seminars and hands-on programs[10,11] are becoming more common and better attended, as well as use of online resources, social media, and webinars to disseminate the latest information and provide an interactive forum within the horse community.

Although recent forage trends in the equine industry may be disheartening at first glance, new innovative nutrition strategies, availability of forage alternatives, increased prevalence of educational opportunities and the use of modern communication forums are available and effective solutions in the face of forage challenges. The need for new innovative nutrition and management solutions as well as a willingness of the horse community to learn and adopt new practices is greater than ever. Horses are always going to have a forage requirement; we're just going to have to get more creative with how we satisfy that requirement.

1 Glunk EC, Weber W, Martinson KL. The effect of hay net design on rate and amount of forage consumed by adult horses. 2013; Proc. Equine Science Society, J. Equine Vet. Sci. 33:362-363.

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[4] Privatsky SL, Earing JE, Lamb JA, Sheaffer CC, Martinson KL. Pasture best management practices on horse farms in Minnesota and Wisconsin. 2013; Proc. Equine Science Society, J. Equine Vet. Sci. 33:398-399.

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[7] http://www.esc.rutgers.edu/

[8] http://www1.extension.umn.edu/agriculture/horse/

[9] http://www.extension.org/horses

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[11] Martinson KL, Earing JE, Lamb JA, Sheaffer CC. University of Minnesota Equine Pasture Management Program. 2013; Proc. Equine Science Society, J. Equine Vet. Sci. 33:387-388.

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